Midnight Champagne

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Extract

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Ceremony

Valentine's Day. Mid-afternoon. A crossroads thirty miles north of the Illinois line, each highway straight as a stickpin holding fast a tidy seam. Who can't describe the American heartland, those glorious patchwork quilts of corn and wheat? But this is deep winter, the sun pale as ice. The fields are the featureless white of amnesia. Fence posts and windbreaks divide them like the clean lines of desire. And right smack in the middle of it all sits the Great Lakes Chapel and Hideaway Lodge, mired in a pool of plowed asphalt.

At a glance, the Chapel doesn't look so bad: big-shouldered old house with twin dormers overlooking the parking lot, red-brick chimney, lace curtains thick as cobwebs in the windows. After checking in at the lobby, guests zig and zag along an asphalt path until they reach the Hideaway Lodge, a long, low structure housing thirty-six suites – some with peekaboo views of Lake Michigan – divided by a shotgun hall. All are decorated according to theme: Caribbean Holiday, Night in Tunisia, Mountain

Vista, Paradise. But locals still remember the Chapel and Lodge as the notorious dance hall and roadhouse it once was, operating without censure until 1959 when its proprietress, a woman named Gretel Fame, was murdered by a jealous lover. People who spend the night here are usually from Milwaukee and Chicago: tourists looking for a little local flavor, adulterers with prerehearsed alibis, couples lugging the weight of their marriages between them like so many stickered steamer trunks. Couples who get married here are generally those (so the saying goes) too young to know or old enough to know better: the brides' beauty spelled out in eyeliner and whipped-topping hair; the grooms sporting ruddy, alcoholic noses and flashing too much cash.

What else about this crossroads catches the eye? Not much. A stretch of struggling businesses known as Bittner's Plaza: a discount liquor store, a minimart, a pizza parlor run by two elderly German sisters. A few houses, no more than a dozen, spaced as neatly as buttons. A billboard advertising the Great Lakes Chapel and Hideaway Lodge's Fabulous Hot Tub Suites: a handsome man and woman smile in a lazy, self-satisfied way, the woman's breasts caressed by a burst of steam. Every few years, crossroads residents join forces with various church groups, perhaps an aspiring politician or two, and present Ralph Bamberger – owner of the Chapel – with a petition regarding that billboard.

Bamberger files these and other petitions in the circular file. Opposition is the nature of business; he doesn't let it bother him too much. A man can't expect that everybody will throw flowers at his feet all the time.

What yanks his bobber is how often bullet holes have scarred the billboard couple's complexions like a rash. Each time, he pays good money to have everything repaired. What else can he do? Bullet holes don't make the right impression on potential clients. Bullet holes don't fit with the storybook wedding Bamberger helps them imagine when they all sit down together in his posh planning parlor off the lobby: the bride- and groom-to-be, sometimes their parents, more likely their grown children, and all of their wallets fat as plums. His daughter, Emily – both caterer and consultant – takes notes as Bamberger explains the options. Marriage is a challenge, that's a fact, he'll say. So you might as well start things off on the right foot.

Don't I know it, the groom-to-be might say. *My first wife, she never forgave me that quick trip to the courthouse. Never mind we went to Hawaii afterward . . .*

I've been around the block a time or two, the bride might say, *I don't deny it. But I'm turning over this new leaf, see? This time I want everything traditional, I want the wedding June Cleaver dreamed about . . .*

I want to invite every one of my friends who said this would never work out . . .

I want to invite my ex, let him see what he's missing . . .

Bamberger has heard it all before, and it means pretty much the same thing. They are young and afraid; they are not so young and afraid. They've screwed up in the past, but damn it, they still have hope. And they'll pay whatever it might cost to set that hope, like the precious stone it is, into an appropriate 24k setting. So Bamberger shows them through the lobby and into the ballroom, where guests will first observe the ceremony and, later, dance to celebrate it. The ballroom is an airy restoration: Gothic windows, a stage for the house band, everything outlined in strings of crisp, white lights. Golden cherubs, the size of human infants, hang suspended around a massive chandelier. At the front of the room, an exposed stairway leads to a balcony; this is the spot where, during the dance hall's glory days, men stood to choose from the ladies dancing on the floor below. The hallway behind him led to small rooms available by the quarter hour. Now these same rooms are elegant dressing rooms: HIS to the left, HERS to the right. Rose-scented hand lotion in the dispensers. Padded toilet seats and potpourri. Full-length mirrors and plush red rugs, even a small TV.

And a secret – a narrow service elevator built into an expanded dumbwaiter shaft. Once, the shaft had been concealed, used only during police raids, when Gretel Fame and the luckier of her ladies lowered themselves

into the basement, one by one, and escaped through the root-cellar door. Now the basement is a game room. Just before the ceremony, the bride takes the elevator down from her dressing room, weaves her way between the pool table and pinball machines, then climbs the public stairwell that returns her to the lobby. When the 'Wedding March' begins to play, she enters at the back of the ballroom, surprising unsuspecting guests whose eyes are fixed on the balcony.

Is everybody happy so far? Does everybody like what they see? Then it's on to the dining room just beyond the ballroom, accessed through arched doorways, one on either side of the balcony stairs. Walk to the left or the right – take your pick! For here is yet another surprise: the original mahogany bar, its marble top intact. The groom imagines his aging buddies coveting the bride from the tall bar stools. The bride envisions the long tables filled with members of her family, and everyone getting along *so* beautifully: Mother speaking charitably with Father's new wife; Sister downplaying her own successful marriage; Brother, for once, laying off the politics. And no one making jokes about déjà vu, comparing this wedding to the last, now *he* was a dud, they all saw that one coming and if only she had listened—

Now, now. There will be none of that. For the room is softly lit, like a church. The windows look out upon a

quiet patio and the shaggy windbreak of pines. Through the trees, the bride and groom can see the little path leading toward the Lodge, where they'll spend the first night of their married lives in a king-size, heart-shaped bed. There will be champagne in a small refrigerator, chocolates and hot-house strawberries in a basket, thick white terrycloth robes. Yes, this is the place, this is exactly what they've been looking for, the bride and groom are fully prepared to make a deposit right away!

Only let them snap a few more pictures. Let them ask Emily yet another question about the cake. Poor girl – she's clearly on the wrong side of thirty, and still no prospects. What a shame. The bride and groom clasp hands gratefully. It's a terrible thing, to be alone. They stand one last time beneath the balcony, imagine themselves mounting those winding stairs before most of the people they love and more than a few they don't. Before full-blown ghosts of past disasters and new ghosts clamoring to be born. Before the ancient flourishing grief between women and men. Still, they will promise, without hesitation, to love and honor and cherish in richness and poverty, sickness and health, speaking in time with the rhythm of their hearts: I do, I do, I do.

Elmer Liesgang usually wasn't inclined to cast stones. If a couple wanted to get married in an old whorehouse,

well, let them. He didn't pretend to understand half of what went on in the world these days. But this wasn't just another Chapel wedding, unrecognized by any church. This was the wedding of his oldest child, April, just twenty-two years old, with a newly minted college degree and her whole life still ahead of her. It was unthinkable. It was unbearable. And it was happening, like any accident, in terrible slow motion. Angrily, he paced the length of the lobby, ignoring the attempts of the desk clerk to engage him in friendly conversation. Outside, a light snow had started to fall. Most of the guests had already been seated, but as the light dimmed to an uneasy twilight, those who had not secured reservations at the Lodge were slipping out of the ballroom, one by one, to phone the nearby Budgetel. The reception was scheduled for five o'clock, immediately after the ceremony. At six-thirty, there'd be a sit-down supper; at eight o'clock, a dance. Ten-thirty bouquet toss. Midnight champagne. Nobody wanted to get stuck driving home in a winter storm.

Elmer checked his watch: already ten past four. He opened the door leading to the game room, in case April was waiting downstairs. She wasn't. Perhaps she was having second thoughts. Perhaps she had realized she was making a mistake she'd regret for the rest of her life. Perhaps her mother had managed to talk some sense – but no. Through the ballroom doorway, he could see

Mary Fran chattering amicably, even happily, with the groom. Caleb Shannon had grown up in Nashville: his father, a minister, had founded a church called the New Life Christian Joy Fellowship. Caleb was twenty-six years old. He had red, wiry hair and freckled skin, dimples so deep they looked as if they'd been made with a nail set. Other than these features, he seemed like any other young man you might see on the street and not particularly notice. There was, of course, his Southern accent, which Elmer understood was something women found attractive. It allowed him to say things like *Yes, ma'am* and *No, sir* without the slightest hint of condescension. He did not consider himself particularly religious. He liked to cook. He never watched TV. Sports? Well, he'd played some tennis as a kid. These were the facts, and the facts explained nothing. The couple had been dating for fourteen weeks, sharing Caleb's condo for ten.

There'd been only one bedroom in Caleb's condo. There'd been only one bed in the bedroom. Up until his surprise visit, Elmer had been willing to give April the benefit of the doubt. Had he seen a small cot, even a sleeping bag rolled up in a corner – but no. Just the bed, a *double* bed, with a masculine pine frame. It was nothing like the twin bed with the quilted white headboard that April had claimed, only months earlier, from her bedroom at home. *This* bed reclined massively beneath

one of April's paintings – something new – which depicted the suggestive shapes of a man and woman ensnared within a purple web. Stepping closer, he squinted at the title.

Lovers.

There could be no doubt after that.

So what had gone wrong? Elmer didn't understand. After a protracted and theatrical adolescence, April had pulled herself hand over hand into adulthood, and he'd dared to hope that she'd really turned out okay. True, she'd broken off her long-standing engagement to Barney Lohr – a disappointment to everyone – but she'd redeemed herself by graduating from UW-Madison with highest honors (and the art department's annual prize) and moving to Minneapolis, where she'd landed a job at a cooperative gallery. She'd recently sold two of her own paintings to museums, each for a fair amount of cash; new work was on display in group exhibitions in Chicago, Indianapolis, and Louisville. She'd quit smoking. She'd even removed her nose ring and allowed that distressing little hole to close. She came home to visit less and less, though when she did, she spoke energetically about her responsibilities at the gallery, describing in bright, laborious detail the squabbles between the directors, the outrageous behavior of the other artists, the ways in which the 'exposure' was helping her gain perspective on her own work.

Looking back, Elmer could only wish that he'd paid closer attention during those visits, rather than opening the *Journal-Sentinel* and leaving Mary Fran to supply the *uh-huhs* and *oh, reallys*. For the gallery was where she had met her new fiancé. He'd arrived in search of paintings to liven up the walls of Maple, Curry, Pederson and Tauschek, the law firm where he'd worked for the past five years. Not as a lawyer, either – now, *that* Elmer might have understood. But no, Caleb Shannon had majored in liberal arts at a small, experimental college outside Minneapolis. In fact, he was *considering* law school. He was also *considering* a master's degree in art history, and a welding apprenticeship. The Peace Corps had also occurred to him, but he wasn't sure, he just didn't know. For now, he was happy as a company gofer, an errand man, the one to whom the lawyers handed their keys when their BMWs needed an oil change; the one who picked up their shirts from the cleaners, their prescriptions from the pharmacy; the one who brewed their coffee, fetched their lunches, arranged the flowers in the lobby, and generally made certain the office atmosphere was, in every way, a pleasant one. And that day in the gallery, when his eye had swept over countless floral bouquets and pastoral landscapes to rest upon one of April's own bright, turbulent paintings, she had known – just like that – he was the one.

Just like that. Elmer sank into one of the twin leather

couches, stared up at the head of an enormous moose, which was mounted above the fireplace. He tried to gauge the expression in the creature's glassy eyes. Embarrassment, he decided. Embarrassment flecked with dread. Life was never *just like that*. It was complicated, and painful, and never the way it seemed. *Just like that* he'd gotten engaged to Mary Fran. *Just like that* he'd become a father. *Just like that* he'd woken up to discover he was yet another middle-aged man. For twenty-five years he'd worked for the city of Holly's Field, trimming the grass in summer, plowing the streets in winter, and he ran a bicycle repair shop on the side. At night, he watched TV until long after Mary Fran had gone to bed. Then he eased himself gingerly between the sheets, as if sinking into an uncomfortably warm bath.

'Are we ready?' Ralph Bamberger ducked out of the back office, fixing Elmer with a polished smile.

'Not yet, no,' Elmer said, but with that, the door to the game room opened, and April stepped up into the lobby, wearing her mother's wedding dress. Hastily altered, the dress was still too big, and her small, cropped head emerged from all that fabric like a child peering out of a snowbank. The sleeves and hem were tinged with yellow, and as she turned to untwist the train – nearly dropping her bouquet – a couple of fake pearls *pinged* from the beaded bodice, bounced across the parquet floor, and disappeared.